
Promoting London's academic libraries: the London Higher Factsheet

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Within the M25 Consortium of academic libraries, the M25 Collaboration and Partnership Working Group (http://www.m25lib.ac.uk/collaboration_and_partnership_working_group/2.html) is responsible for managing collaborative activities on behalf of the consortium's 55 member institutions. The group maintains links with a number of regional, national and government bodies, including London Higher. The idea of producing an online factsheet on London's academic libraries was the result of the close working relationship that has been established over the past three years.

London Higher (<http://www.londonhigher.ac.uk>) exists to promote and develop London's higher education sector. With a steering committee drawn from vice- chancellors selected from among its 40 member universities and higher education colleges, it fulfils a promotion and advocacy role which is supported by the London Development Agency and works in partnership with the Mayor of London and London First. Its series of key factsheets is designed to give an overview of the strength and diversity of London's higher education community and its contribution to and economic impact on London as a

region. Having produced factsheets on the international student market and on higher education staff, it then discussed with the M25 Collaboration and Partnership Working Group plans for a third factsheet in the series which would cover academic libraries. Evidence Base, the research and evaluation unit within UCE Birmingham's Library Services, was commissioned to do the detailed work by the chair of the M25 Collaboration and Partnership Working Group on behalf of the M25 Steering Group.

The M25 Consortium extends beyond the boundaries of London itself into the M25 region and beyond. The first step was therefore to identify those institutions within the consortium who were also members of London Higher. Using the SCONUL statistics for 2004-5,¹ basic information was then collected on such key facts as numbers of books, numbers of annual visits, issues and so on. Information of the number of external users of London's libraries was obtained from UK Libraries Plus and SCONUL Research Extra.

Part of the diversity of London's higher education is the number of specialist art, music and drama colleges within the capital. Several of these do not currently contribute to the SCONUL annual statistics. Individual approaches were made to 15 specialist colleges asking for basic statistics and descriptions of their library collections and a good response was received, so that we were able to include all the institutions in the factsheet.

Some impressive statistics emerged. There are 154 libraries within London Higher's 40 institutions, including 23% of all higher education libraries in the UK, between them offering 33,000 study places and 21 million books. Statistics do not tell the whole story, so the next stage was to identify some key themes and to provide links to individual libraries as examples or case studies. The themes selected were:

- Regional, national and global impact
- The changing face of academic libraries
- Strengths in the creative arts, health, business and science
- Specialist collections of books, manuscripts and archives
- Other world class libraries in London.

Searching university websites in relation to the themes outlined above immediately struck two obstacles:

1 Where is the library?

From the home page of a university's outward-facing web-site, it was often difficult to track down the library directly. Intuitive searching of inner pages or the A-Z search facility was needed to get results.

2 What does the library offer?

While academic departments were marketing their wares to potential students, the library link generally led directly into the pages devised for current students and staff. It was often difficult to locate information on the library's special features and strengths, and information about any services to external users tended to be couched in a 'what you can and cannot do' language rather than 'Welcome to the library.'

The primary aim of a library website is naturally to explain its services to its key market of staff and student users and to provide a clear path through to the resources it provides. It would, of course, be foolish to assume that a student's main interest in selecting a university is the strength of its library and information resources. However, there may be other users of the external web pages for whom this information is of value. If libraries are serious about opening up their collections then perhaps they should be looking at their websites from an outsider's point of view to see if they always provide the type of information that is useful to visitors.

Information that could be gleaned from university websites was supplemented by searches of services such as MASC25 (<http://www.masc25.ac.uk/>), which maps special collections in the London region, and AIM25 (<http://www.aim25.ac.uk/>) which provides information on archives in London and the M25 area. Much information also came through personal contact, especially from the M25 Collaboration and Partnership Working Group, who provided help and advice throughout the project. The M25 Advocacy Working Group also provided valuable input. This variety of approach provided a good and varied selection of anecdotal evidence to flesh out the statistics with which the project had begun.

While a representative group of libraries has been included in this first edition, it was not possible to include all libraries that had special collections

or were doing innovative work. For this reason, the second edition planned for November 2007, will not only update the statistics in line with the SCONUL 2005–6 returns, but will also change some of the examples quoted, with London Higher libraries being invited to make suggestions for inclusion.

The key factsheet on London's academic libraries can be viewed online at http://www.london-higher.ac.uk/docs/Libraries_Keyfacts06.pdf. Favourable comments have been received from vice-chancellors and library managers. A further worksheet covering IT resources in London Higher institutions is now under discussion.

REFERENCE

- 1 SCONUL annual library statistics 2004–2005, SCONUL, 2006; available at <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/statistics/> [Accessed ...?]